

Peter Middleton. *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 241p.

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Peter Middleton's thesis can be usefully seen as a development in the area of reception theory. In questioning the very concept of "reading" as a context-specific activity, the idea of poetry as performance, and the positions of poet/actor and reader/audience, are problematized. What, Middleton challenges us, is the relationship between the physical manifestation of the poem on the page and the "transcendent" meaning of the material (if any)? If meaning is constructed by the reader and/or "performer," spatial, temporal, and economic factors necessarily affect every individual reading of the text.

In the first chapter the idea of the "long biography" of poetry is used to refer to the way in which texts project their readings forward in time. This recognizes that whilst the position of the "future" reader is foreign to the process of literal composition, that individual will ultimately be the "author" of the distant reading. Texts then attempt "to anticipate and thereby negotiate their possible reception" (5) as part of their very construction. "Distance reading" is therefore a reading that constitutes "only one moment of the text's future" (8-9). The critic, then, should not try to close the reading down or "fix it," but acknowledge his or her reaction as constituting "one moment" in the development of the text. In this chapter Middleton uses "Ave Maria" from Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery's "Syringa" to illustrate "distance." Although this book claims to address "the post-war era of American and British poetry" (xvii), there seem to be relatively few British poets included. The strength of this publication is its handling of theory and the establishment of new ideas in these areas. This is not a book focusing on close textual criticism of a broad body of literature; the tone is largely historicist, political, and factual, as opposed to analytical. However, this is an important beginning to future research and writing in this area.

Chapter Two focuses on the development of the "poetry reading" in contemporary culture, and links this into the socio-economic consequences of the rise of print culture. Middleton asks whether the performance of a poem can be directive of significance, and whether as an audience we react to physical aspects that we would not normally encounter in a "silent reading." The concept of "reading the person" problematizes a literary theory that seeks to deny authorial presence. In this way Middleton's thesis is particularly challenging but at the same time represents an important contribution to a widening of these areas of theoretical debate. Touching

on Saussure, Jung, Kristeva, Derrida, and Waugh to name a few, this chapter contains the most comprehensive theoretical discussion within the book. The construction and shaping of language is discussed as a primary directive in our interpretation of poetry, recognizing that language and its meanings are not fixed.

The final explicatory chapter, “The History of Reading,” addresses specifically the development of the “poetry reading” since the beginning of the twentieth century. Middleton considers that this “begins” with the first (oral) performance of Ginsberg’s “Howl” in 1955, which success sparked the development of a number of similar projects (61). Whilst there are a number of references to “bard” culture stretching back to Roman society, the discussion of the “oral” culture of poetry does not here extend much beyond the scope of the twentieth century. A long-held assumption about the development of reading is overthrown when we consider that “historians of writing and reading are finding evidence that supports the idea that orality and literacy are much more interdependent than has hitherto been supposed” (74). The power of the voice then is not marginalized in terms of assumptions based on the hierarchical status of modes of expression. In this third chapter Middleton leads a striking investigation into the politicization of voice and poetry through its physical and oral usage, also discussing the supposed radicalism that is then assumed to be connected to these types of artistic performance.

But what can a “collective meaning” signify? Middleton talks of the “transaction” that exists (and investigates ideas of “consumption” that lead into his final chapter). The spoken language of an oral performance has the power to destroy or intensify specific signifiers (for example stanza-breaks, imperative words, line-length), perhaps in direct reaction to the audience at a particular reading. This then constructs the poem as “a virtual public space” where “the audience too is a performance, a staging of itself as an audience” (101). In a similar way, in Chapter Four, we experience the “readerly absorption into the poem’s performance of self-consciousness” (115) that underlies Middleton’s at times highly-subjective style: often personal testimony appears to serve as introduction, or explanation, or signifies in the regular positioning of questions within the text.

The final four chapters appear as stand-alone essays, supporting or reflecting the ideas explored earlier in his theoretical work. “The Line-Break in Everyday Life” is a particularly challenging article to read, but it effectively communicates the concept of form as directive of significance. Having read this chapter I clearly understood his point (in relation to J.H. Prynne’s work):

